



MINUTES OF THE CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION held Wednesday, May 29, 2002 for the purpose of meeting with the Prince George's County Fire Chief and representatives from the 4-Cities Coalition.

The meeting began at 8:08 p.m. It was held in the Council Room of the Municipal Building.

PRESENT WERE: Council members Rodney M. Roberts, Edward V.J. Putens, Thomas X. White and Mayor Judith F. Davis.

CITY STAFF PRESENT WERE: Michael McLaughlin, City Manager and David Moran, Assistant to the City Manager.

ALSO PRESENT WERE: Mayor Bradley Jewitt and Council members Patti Dennison, Ronald Shane, Daithi Htun and Theresa Laughlin, Town of Berwyn Heights; Mayor Steve Brayman and Councilmember Donald Byrd, City of College Park; Mayor Andy Hanko and City Administrator Jeff Klem, City of New Carrollton; Audrey Scott, County Councilwoman; Joan Pitkin, State Delegate; James Hubbard, State Delegate; Andy Eppleman; Aide to County Councilmember Dernoga; Carol White, Aide to County Councilmember Hendershot; Ronald Blackwell, Prince George's County Fire Chief; William McGown, John Crisman and C. Kirk Jackson, Prince George's County Fire Department; Jay Remenick, President, Greenbelt Volunteer Fire Department; Randy Krob, Chief, Greenbelt Volunteer Fire Department; John Alter, Chief, West Lanham Hills Volunteer Fire Department; Amy Boyes, Gazette and Sheldon Goldberg, Greenbelt East Advisory Committee.

There were introductions. Mayor Davis began by thanking Chief Blackwell for attending. She outlined the concerns of the various cities about proposed removal of career personnel from fire stations.

Chief Blackwell stated that upon his appointment, he had asked key staff to look at ways to better utilize existing resources. He stated that historically the County had attempted to staff every fire station in the County. The chief indicated that by reassigning some staff he thought there could be better service provided. He noted that nationally there was an effort to place 4 firefighters on a truck.

Mayor Davis expressed concern that municipalities had not been included early in the discussion process. She noted the special needs of the community including seniors and areas with large daytime populations such as Goddard Space Flight Center and commercial office parks.

Mayor Brayman stated that College Park had the University of Maryland which generates 40-50% of the fire calls. He indicated there were traffic issues on Route 1 which could impact response time. He stressed the need to increase levels of service where it is needed without decreasing services in other communities.

Mayor Jewitt stated that Berwyn Heights station didn't have a pumper and noted that they depended on Branchville, Greenbelt and College Park for this response.

Chief Blackwell stressed that no firefighters would be lost, but that they might be reallocated to a different station. He stated that when someone calls 911, firefighters will respond.

Mayor Davis asked about what problems the department was having with recruitment. Chief Blackwell responded that it was a complex job market and also that many firefighters were retiring.

Mr. Putens asked about what criteria was being used and who would make the final decision regarding relocation of personnel. Chief Blackwell indicated that he would make the final decision and that there were many factors regarding daytime coverage.

Councilwoman Scott stated that Prince George's was losing firefighters to other jurisdictions and attrition. She indicated that the County was not up to its full complement of firefighters and that there was a staffing problem throughout the County. Mrs. Scott reported that the County Council had asked the County Executive for an additional one million dollars for staffing and recruitment in the Fire Department budget. She stressed that only the County Executive could add money to the budget and that he was not likely to change his position and had not been receptive to the Council's request.

Delegate Pitkin asked why Prince George's was losing firefighters. Chief Blackwell responded that it was a region-wide problem. He indicated that there were many factors, including firefighters who decided not to continue in the training academy.

Council Member Roberts stated that we were currently in a wartime situation. He stressed the need to respond to hazardous situations. He requested that the Chief focus on the need for more resources and work with the Cities to get additional resources for the Fire Department.

Council Member Shane expressed concerns about the studies and computer models used to develop these preliminary plans. He also stated that the daytime population in this area swells and causes the need for many calls. He suggested that the requirement for firefighters to take EMS training may be a deterrent to recruitment.

Council Member White asked if the million dollars would solve the problem. The Chief responded it would help, but the problem was bigger than that. Councilwoman Scott stated that the decision had already been made and the million dollars would not be approved by county Executive Curry. Council Member White asked if the current staffing level of 696 firefighters were enough. The Chief responded that we hadn't been up to 696 for many years.

Mr. White asked what it would take to keep firefighters in the four communities. Chief Blackwell stated that he needed to be at 696 and currently only had around 636.

Delegate Hubbard stated that the 696 level needed to be brought up to a 2002 level. He stressed that proper Adequate Public Facilities (APF) requirements were needed to determine what the actual fire personnel need is based on today's demographics.

Councilman Byrd stressed that the communities were here to help the fire service. He stressed the demographics at the University of Maryland. He also mentioned development projects in the area, such as the new Ikea store, that would generate the need for fire response.

Chief Krob asked where things stood with regard to the study/proposal/etc. Chief Blackwell responded that when they've got some firm decisions they will let people know.

Council Member Laughlin asked about the availability of federal funding. Chief Blackwell indicated that the money had not been released and couldn't be used for hiring purposes.

Chief Alter expressed concern about the number of stations in this area that would be without personnel.

Sheldon Goldberg stressed that there are many federal facilities in the area including NASA, BARC and the Archives facility. There was some discussion about the need to engage these facilities in discussions about providing fire protection on site and/or contributing funds to support the County Fire Department.

Council Woman Scott asked the Chief about his conversations with the County Executive about additional funding.

President Remenick expressed concern about a document that had been received from the County. He stated that Greenbelt could not find volunteers available to staff the stations during the day, because most volunteers worked. Mr. Remenick suggested that money was the issue there were ways to raise the needed funds.

Mr. Epplenman stated that Prince George's County had changed since 1990 and stated that 696 fire personnel wasn't enough. He stressed that the fire protection was not growing as the County has grown.

Councilman Putens asked who was working on the long-term solutions. He suggested that the 4-Cities might want to form their own regional fire service. Chief Blackwell expressed support for some consolidation. He stressed that in the short-term, he had to provide fire protection throughout the County.

Delegate Pitkin asked if the County Executive was aware of the information presented at this meeting and stated her belief that he needed this information.

Mayor Jewitt stated this was a unique coalition. He stressed that Chief Blackwell needed to hear what had been said and needed to take it under advisement.

Council Member Shane suggested that more fire personnel were needed in this area and hoped that additional personnel would be moved here.

Mayor Brayman noted that most housing in this area did not have sprinklers. He expressed concern about MNCPPC not providing County staff with correct information. He suggested that the Chief hold off on any changes until he had additional information.

Councilwoman Scott stated that the fire department needed to update the optimum staffing level. She stated that the County needed to look at its cross training policy because this was causing personnel to leave. She agreed that we approach Federal agencies and suggest that they assume their responsibility for protecting their facilities. Councilwoman Scott indicated that she would be willing to introduce legislation to strengthen APF requirements and would investigate whether State or County legislation was needed. She was willing to put a question on the ballot to create fire districts for taxing purposes.

Mayor Davis suggested a letter from the 4-Cities requesting a meeting with the County Executive to discuss this issue. She also suggested a letter to Federal legislators expressing concern about the lack of fire resources at federal facilities.

Mayor Brayman suggested that there be outreach to the Federal facilities first with a meeting of facility managers.

The meeting ended at 10:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
David E. Moran
Assistant to the City Manager